Black.Smoking.Angel [English] (/en/story/127504/black-smoking-angel-english/)

Donate to this author
(/en/story/payment/127504/)

ADVERTISEMENT

Follow story •••

24 chapters 30min 33s reading time

ADVERTISEMENT

< (/en/story/127504/chapter-twenty-one-solo-iii-1600312/)

Chapter Twenty-two: Solo IV

December, 2024

Both my hands were tied behind my back. The rigid backrest of that rusted metal chair dug into the top of my spine, making every movement unbearable. I ran my tongue across my lower lip and tasted a

sharp, metallic bitterness. My entire face throbbed, and I was almost certain it looked utterly mangled. I tried to let out a groan, but the dryness in my throat only worsened the pain each time I attempted to make a sound. Some dripping echoed through the room, but neither the dim lighting nor the swelling around my eyes allowed me to pinpoint where it came from.

A rough punch to my left cheekbone knocked me out for a split second, and the only thing keeping me from collapsing was the rope holding my midsection against the seat. My gaze fell to the ground, where countless drops of blood lay scattered—my blood. Some still wet, others already dried. Letting my vision climb up my own body, I could see those same stains speckling my bare feet and pants. Struggling to breathe, I lifted my head. It took considerable effort to bring my surroundings back into focus.

A bald man was massaging the knuckles of his right hand, muttering curses under his breath. There were three of them in

total, each with a firearm holstered at their waist. They took turns beating me. The most vicious among them carried a Colt .45—I remember that clearly.

Another blow, this time to the opposite cheek. Then to my jaw, and again to my gut. I spat a vile mix of saliva, blood, and bile onto my thighs. I wasn't even given a moment to catch my breath—his hand grabbed me by the hair and yanked me upright again.

"You're going to kill him, Rico."

"I'll kill him if he doesn't talk."

"Then put a bullet in his skull already and stop wasting our time. Easier to say he didn't tell us anything and be done with it. We've been at this nearly two days."

"No... not yet!"

Another fist smashed into my face. No one had ever hit me as hard as that son of a bitch. He struck so forcefully it felt like each blow shaved hours off my life.

The third man, stationed near the room's only entrance, sighed as he watched me spit blood once more. His face was marked with scars, and a wool cap sat on his head. Then he spoke.

"He doesn't know anything."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Look at him. Almost forty-eight hours of nonstop questioning. No food, no water, no rest. All he's managed to produce are insults, groans, vomit, and blood."

Rico grabbed me by the fringe, jerking my head back, ready to hit again.

"These stateless soldiers have no loyalty, Rico. If he really knew something, he would've given up his comrades' location long ago."

My gaze drifted from the bald one to the scarred man. I summoned all the strength I had and spoke.

"You... you were... Laurent, right? I'm not... stateless."

Rico released my hair only to deliver a kick to my chest with the sole of his boot, knocking me to the floor along with the chair. I coughed violently, turning my head to avoid choking on my own fluids.

"I already told you not to speak unless it's something we want to hear!"

As I struggled to reclaim the air ripped from my lungs, a sudden torrent of filthy water was dumped over my head.

"Enough, Rico."

The second man had approached while I was distracted. He tossed aside the empty bucket and lifted my chair, setting me upright again. I watched Rico back away, grumbling, while I began licking the water dripping down my face—I needed

moisture desperately.

"Let's make this easier."

"We're not ordered to kill him, Flavio."

"I'm not going to kill him. He's going to kill himself."

That second man was thinner than the others. Pale, with dark hair and oddly colored eyes—almost gray.

"You gave us your name earlier. Alex?"

He found a small stool and sat in front of me, barely a meter away.

"...Alez."

"Right, Alez. Listen, Alez, you're not the only one sick of this. We came back from a long, messy mission, and just when we thought we'd get a break, the Ahri politely asked us to come have a chat with you."

"Flavio!"

"Relax, Laurent. Let me handle this."

I didn't yet understand what had caused the man with the wool cap to tense up so suddenly.

"If it were up to me, you'd be rotting in a ditch by now. Sadly, my colleagues and I don't share the same views. However… they've had their shot at making you talk."

He looked at the other two. Neither returned his stare.

"Luckily for me, the Ahri trusts me more than those two. So we all know that if I choose to get rid of you, the boss won't be too bothered. What I'm saying is..."

Through my blurred vision, Flavio unholstered his revolver and swung open the cylinder. Empty.

"You'll be the one to decide how this

interrogation ends."

"..."

"This next question is on the house. Do you want me to kill you right now and put an end to this? It'll be fast, painless—and we all get to go home happy."

Eyes fixed on the weapon in his hands, I slowly shook my head. He nodded.

"Good. Then let's begin."

He set the revolver down and reached into one of the side pockets of his combat trousers. After a moment of rummaging, he pulled out two bullets—identical to the eye. He held them up, showing me, then kept one in each hand.

"Only one of these has a live primer. Choose. Your fate is in your own hands, Alez."

I sat there, dumbfounded. I couldn't tell

whether this was just another twisted trick to get me to talk, or if he truly intended to end me in such a vile manner. I looked back and forth between the two rounds, searching for anything that might set them apart, any detail that could tip me off as to which one was live. But in my condition, nothing registered.

Flavio's expression was blank, lifeless—like someone comparing prices at an electronics store.

"What's the matter? Should I choose for you?"

"Left one."

I said it, then swallowed hard. Sweat began to trickle down my face, mixing with grime and blood. As I watched him slide the round into the chamber, my hands began to thrash against the restraints of their own accord. My feet kicked with desperate instinct, as though some part of me still believed I could launch myself at him and stop all this. I

hadn't come this far just to die over a sick game.

He closed the cylinder and lowered the hammer with such calmness it made me want to scream. Then, without ceremony, he rested the grip of the revolver on his knee, the barrel pointed directly at my head.

"Here's how this works. I'll ask you a question. You answer. If you hesitate or I think you're lying, I pull the trigger. At that point, whether you live or die will depend solely on your own decision. You get one life to use if you think you're fucking up. Use it wisely."

"Sick... You're... sick."

"First question."

Laurent and Rico looked disinterested, clearly unfazed. They'd seen this routine more times than they could count.

"Who are you? I want the full story."

"..."

"Speak!"

I bit down hard, forcing my lips to stop trembling. Then let my voice spill out.

"Alez Braviel. Twenty-four. Austrian. U-until two years ago, I served in the Austrian army. We were stationed at a base in Italy w-when... Amere forces attacked. Almost everyone died. Maybe all of them. I don't know. I ran. S-since then, I've been alone. Just trying to find food, somewhere to hide. I—"

The hammer snapped down.

There was no blast. No bullet. My lungs seized, and I only managed to breathe again once the muzzle drifted away from my forehead.

"A-ah..."

I slumped against the chair, gasping.

There wasn't a single muscle in my body that wasn't shaking. My teeth clattered, my breath came in erratic bursts. I didn't know whether to feel relieved I was still alive or terrified that the questioning was far from over.

"Lucky bastard..."

Flavio opened the revolver and let the dud fall to the ground. Then took out two more bullets and repeated the process.

"N-no. Stop. You're insane. This is madness, it's—"

"Do you want it over with?"

"No! That's not it!"

"Choose."

I couldn't look at the bullets anymore. I met his gaze instead and spoke in the weakest voice I'd ever heard from my own throat.

"Right one..."

Bullet loaded. Back to his previous position.

"I don't buy that you were just looking for food. If you're not stateless, that means you chose a side during that clash. How do you explain that?"

I swallowed and began again. The words spilled out so quickly, even I could barely follow them.

"I-I saw a chance! Saw they were losing and—no, from the beginning. I was near Belgrade and heard gunfire. I moved closer, saw both sides were low on numbers. From what I know, the stateless tend to have better weapons. I just thought —kill a few Amere, grab supplies, and vanish. They'd think their guys died in the fight, wouldn't chase me. It's... it's survival logic, that's all. I took down two... maybe three, who were isolated. Took their stuff.

Left. I didn't—"

The hammer dropped again. That chilling sound froze my entire body. I let out a strangled cry, cursed under my breath, and lifted my face to the ceiling as I exhaled all the air in my chest.

"Twice in a row. Impressive."

Without pause, Flavio reloaded. I needed time before I could even speak again.

"... Right one."

"Okay then... your story matches parts of the mission reports, but there's one inconsistency. Alez, you killed seven Amere soldiers. Apparently on your own. That's no small feat. Makes us think you had help—maybe one or two others."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Laurent light a cigarette.

"Or... maybe your soldiers are just that useless."

I don't know where I found the courage to say it. But Flavio only snorted, nodded, and loaded another round.

"That's a possibility too."

This time, he aimed straight at my face.

"Third question. If you're so skilled in combat, why not target the stateless directly? You said it yourself—they're better armed. If you wanted supplies, taking down a couple of them from behind was the smarter move."

"..."

I knew what he was trying. No answer would satisfy him. It was a trap. If I lied, I'd have to build a whole story to back it up—and that story would be what gave me

away. There was no way out of this one. The revolver's muzzle blurred in my vision, and all I could focus on were those grayish eyes, brimming with contempt.

I exhaled.

"Because I enjoy killing your kind."

Flavio smiled after a few seconds.

"I use the life!"

I said it, barely audible.

He turned the barrel away and fired. The bang was deafening—but it only brought me relief. I was still alive, just stunned.

"Now luck's all you've got left, Alez."

He reached for two more rounds—but a knock at the wooden door stopped him cold.

Laurent raised his head, glanced toward the others.

"We weren't expecting anyone."

"Then..."

"Open it."

Laurent flicked the cigarette to the floor and crushed it under his boot. He grasped the handle and opened the door slowly... his expression changed instantly upon seeing who stood outside.

"Ahri..."

Both he and Rico straightened, suddenly more alert. Flavio only sat up slightly, a minimal gesture of respect.

"Come to check on the interrogation, sir?"

"Something like that."

The voice behind the door was young—but rough. When Laurent stepped aside, a fourth man entered. He was short, lean

but wiry, with tanned skin and brown hair. His green eyes were piercing. A strange sight—one glance and you knew he had to be in his thirties, though neither his voice nor his build betrayed it.

Almost ignoring the others, the man—wearing a black floral shirt and matching slim trousers—walked straight past Flavio and up to me.

"Fuh... look at you. Thought I told you to be gentle, Flavio."

"He wouldn't talk, so we had to escalate."

The one they called Ahri scanned me with the look of someone finding a stray dog on the street.

"I heard the shot. You're playing that game again?"

"It's effective. Thanks to that, he finally shared a few potentially useful details."

"You're sick, man."

Ahri patted Flavio's shoulder. The man gave a quiet sigh and rose from his seat, making way for his superior.

He sat across from me, posture relaxed—almost defenseless. His eyes skimmed my injuries, and he let out a long breath. Then he spoke—not to me.

"You beat him to pieces... I'm guessing that was Rico. Animal. You've got no restraint."

Rico scratched his shoulder in silence, unwilling to protest.

"You didn't feed him either, did you? It's a miracle he's still conscious."

"We..."

The Ahri looked at Laurent, who replied with feigned indifference.

"We kept him hungry. And thirsty. It—"

"'It would break him eventually,' right?"

Ahri finished his sentence, and Laurent exhaled through his nose.

"Idiots. Can't you tell just by looking?"

He grabbed me by the fringe and lifted my head. I met his eyes—and he seemed almost pleased by the dull emptiness in mine.

"This guy's been broken. He was broken *before* Rico even touched him. If anything made him speak, it was the fear of dying like a dog. In that case..."

He let go and wiped his hand on his pants.

"You could've made him talk from the start without turning him into this wreck. Savages. Inefficient."

None of them reacted, nor took offense, likely used to this kind of reprimand. The Ahri turned his head, gave them a single motion with his hand—and that was all it took for the three to head for the door.

"I'll take it from here. If anyone comes in before I say so, you're all on bread and water for a month."

And they left. Silence fell. For nearly a minute, the Ahri stared at the door. I started to grow uneasy. Just as I clicked my tongue in frustration, he spoke.

"Rico, if you're still listening, I swear I'll cut off your damn ear."

I heard footsteps retreat in haste, and couldn't help but feel a flicker of admiration—not for the fear he inspired, but for how he knew *exactly* who had stayed behind to eavesdrop.

Finally, he turned in the chair and looked at me, eyes lit with the curiosity of

a child eager to discover what his new toy could do.

"Viktor Bahramian."

I didn't answer. I had no idea what to say, though it was clear he had just told me his name. So casually. So indifferently. In that moment, the last trace of adrenaline drained from my veins, leaving behind a sharp, searing ache across every nerve ending in my body. But… it didn't matter. The man's demeanor was so strange, it consumed all my attention.

"Alez... Alez Braviel."

A wide grin curved his lips when he heard it, and something in his expression told me it wasn't mere appreciation for my cooperation.

"Alez… good. Nice name. Short, easy to recall. There's a guy on base named Llewellyn—avoid him whenever I can. I

loathe that name."

It wasn't like he was trying to make the mood any lighter. He just… spoke. Said whatever crossed his mind. Acted however he pleased. As if the world itself belonged to him.

"Forget your surname. It no longer matters. It never will."

"Does yours?"

"For some, yes. But you didn't flinch when I said it, so I suppose you can disregard it as well."

"What do you mean by—?"

"Alez."

That assertive, though not commanding, tone made me straighten instinctively—like a dog reacting to its master's voice.

"Alez… seven."

"…"

"No, you didn't kill seven of ours."

"It was... only seven."

"No, no..."

He suddenly sprang to his feet and kicked his chair aside. It crashed against the wall with a bang that echoed through the room, lingering until his voice reclaimed dominance.

"It was far more than seven. Dozens, I'd bet. You've done it repeatedly over the years, wearing us down grain by grain, like… hmm... a termite gnawing at the leg of a chair, unaware it might collapse if it just bit deep enough… or stayed hungry long enough."

"…"

"How many?"

"…"

"Alez, don't go silent now."

He crouched before me, eyes fixed somewhere on my face, unfocused.

"This is just a talk between... near friends, Alez. You've got nothing to hide."

"Friends...? What the hell are you saying?"

"Ah, Alez..."

Clicking his tongue in disappointment, he rose and tapped his boot twice against the floor. He stood still for a few seconds, scratching his nose, mumbling something, then slowly began to circle me.

"Alright, let's change the question."

"I don't follow..."

"What do you think I'm going to do with you?"

"Kill me once you've gotten what you need."

"Is that what *you* did? To an Amere, maybe?"

I swallowed, unsure if I should answer. But he beat me to it before I could part my lips.

"You *did*, didn't you? You're rotting from the inside, Alez."

There was no mockery in his voice, no provocation—only genuine astonishment.

"No, that's not what I intend. Tell me, what good would it do me to kill you?"

"Eliminate a threat… I guess."

A low chuckle rumbled from his throat before he continued.

"A threat? You honestly believe you're a danger to us, Alez? Maybe… maybe you were in *that* moment, in *that* situation, to those unlucky enough to fall under your crosshairs. But to *me*? To Amere? Alez..."

He patted my shoulder twice from behind.

"You're not a threat; you're not even a

nuisance."

His voice grew nearer, and I felt a chill crawl up my spine. I could hear his steps, feel the heat of his breath beside my ear.

"So tell me, Alez. How many of ours did you put down?"

"A... dozens."

"Dozens?"

"Maybe... maybe a hundred…"

"Over a hundred, huh...? Alez, you're a real killer. A pure machine built for taking lives."

He gave me one last pat and walked back to recover his chair.

I could only sit there, staring at him, repeating those words I'd just confessed. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about it before. Pulling the trigger that first time had been agonizing, but after that... I'd taken so many more. Sure, I didn't feel guilt over... most of them. But that didn't mean the

weight on my back had lifted.

He sat down again, directly across from me.

"That's your worth."

"My... worth?"

"Yes, your worth. It's the value I assign you. As a soldier. As a beast. You took down hundreds of my men. In one way or another, you surpassed each of them. That alone makes you valuable to me."

"Many died from behind. Many were ambushed."

"So what? You're still here, talking, breathing, while they're rotting underground. That's the only thing that matters now, Alez."

I dropped my gaze to the floor, staring at both our feet.

"I think... I think I get it. You're... you're insane."

"No, I'm not crazy. I just know how to

make the most of what life hands me. Letting you go would mean wasting the strength of, let's say, a hundred men. But if..."

This time, he didn't grab me by the hair. He lifted me by the arms, like someone helping up a teammate who's lost the will to stand.

"If you join us, then I've gained the might of a hundred and one. Doesn't that sound like a fair trade?"

"You heard me speak. I *hate* Amere. I hate you, your team, your subordinates, and I'd put a bullet through your skull if I had the chance."

"Ha! That may be true. But I don't need your love, Alez. I just need you to fight for me—and with the right incentives, you *will* fight for me."

"Yeah, I was right. You're out of your mind. Sick. A complete lunatic..."

"You'll change your mind. You won't stop hating me—I know that—but you'll

come to realize that... no, you already *have*."

He let me lean back against the chair again and walked to the door, with the relaxed air of a man wandering through his garden on a summer afternoon.

"It's far more useful to hate this world than to hate me—the one giving you a chance to stop living like a stray."

With his hand on the doorknob, he spoke without turning.

"I'll come back later. I need to eat. The guys will return too, but don't worry—they won't hit you. I just need someone watching you. After all... it'd be a hassle if you tried to kill yourself by biting your tongue, or pulling some other dumb stunt."

And then he left, his words still echoing against the walls, while I remained behind

—drained, defeated, and utterly broken beneath forces I couldn't begin to fight.

. . .

He wasn't wrong. At least, that's what I felt then. If I tried to be practical, it was no lie—the world, in its current state, was far, *far* more deserving of hatred than he was. Or even Amere.

Sure, Amere was the main architect of this disaster, no doubt about that, but I couldn't place the blame solely on them. The stateless, the bandits, the soldiers who had betrayed their countries—Amere had no hand in creating them. They chose, of their own will, to align with darkness, to cling to existence by becoming part of it. I wasn't exempt either—my hands had committed atrocities in the name of survival.

I could hate Amere, I could despise the stateless, loathe the bandits, curse the traitorous troops, revile myself... or I could hate the world itself, as a vessel in which

all that rot simmered. What *was* the world, if not the boiling pot that contained every last drop of filth? Experience had taught me that living in such a place was a impossible; the best I could hope for was to survive another day.

I didn't plan on softening my hatred for Amere, but I *could* use it—just as they could use me. A twisted exchange, irredeemable and immoral, that would make me one more among those I detested. To walk alongside the ones who killed my friends, who tore me from everything I ever loved or respected… the ones who stole my future.

How much heavier—or lighter—would the burden become, if I accepted their offer? Roaming alone, trusting no one, had already turned me into an enemy of my own ideals. What difference would it make to join Amere? How much worse could it really get?

Had I known the answer back then, I might not be where I am today.

There was no one left to hold me

accountable. No family to whom I could prove my integrity, no friends to disappoint, no nation to serve, no God to beg forgiveness from. I was alone. And if that was the case... then why not take a step forward into the abyss, a place where no one would judge my actions? With no one to let down, there was no one left to impress. What an empty life... but what freedom it held. Amere... what did Amere even mean anymore? Would I lose my name? Would I cease to be myself?

The water pooled on the floor offered me a dim reflection, in that half-lit room that seemed to mirror the same pressure the future placed upon my chest.

. . .

I wanted to live.

. . .

I don't know how many more days I spent in that room.

The Ahri hadn't lied: I wasn't struck again, not even mistreated.

They fed me, gave me water, even blindfolded me and led me to a washroom to clean myself. Eventually, they removed all restraints and let me move freely within the confines of that room.

He visited often—several times a day. He'd ask me about my past, my skills, my preferences, and in return, he'd share a little about himself. Though his side of the exchange always stayed shallow: his favorite dish, the kind of music he enjoyed.

He started opening up more the day I told him about Zara's death.

"Ah, the raid on the base in Trento! Yeah, I remember that. Funny thing is, I wanted to lead that op, but they gave it to someone else. If they'd listened to me, it wouldn't have ended in such a mess."

"... A mess?"

"Hm? Of course—a complete disaster.

The idiot they put in charge underestimated the speed of the enemy reinforcements. Ours didn't arrive in time, and we had to pull out."

I remember looking at him from my chair, probably with a face that couldn't quite follow where he was going. He laughed and went on.

"Though I'm guessing you were long gone by then. You've got terrible luck. Still, it delivered a crushing blow to what little resistance the Italians had left. We won in the end, but... tch, I just hate knowing I could've done it better. If *I* had been the one giving orders, you wouldn't be alive to hear this now."

Laurent, leaning in the corner with a cigarette hanging from his mouth, let out a puff and scoffed. The Ahri noticed and shifted the topic just slightly.

"You know? That sad bastard over there's

got a story a lot like yours."

Laurent choked on his own smoke.

"We found him bleeding in a police station somewhere south of Belgium, two of our men dead at his feet. He was the last one standing from his whole unit. Hey, Laurent, you remember that?"

"'Course I do..."

He muttered through his teeth, wiping at watery eyes with a handkerchief, the smoke getting to him.

"Covered in blood, down on the ground, waving a knife at us and swearing he'd carve us up if we got close. He was easy to win over. Much easier than you, anyway."

I said nothing.

"That was... what, two years ago?"

"Two years and three months."

"Right. Two years and three months."

My gaze shifted from Laurent to the Ahri, then back again. I hesitated, then spoke.

"Can I have a cigarette?"

The two of them exchanged glances—one of those silent conversations that don't need words. The Ahri smiled, and Laurent stepped forward, placing a single cigarette and a lighter in my hands.

I lit it, inhaling the smoke deep into my lungs.

Back then, I didn't understand what that expression on the Ahri's face meant.He walked up, clapped a hand on my shoulder, and said he'd return at nightfall.

. . .

The next day, I stepped out of the room without a blindfold over my eyes. Flanked

by Laurent and Rico, I walked down the corridor of what I now recognized as the basement of a school. They led me up a staircase, and sunlight poured in through the windows—light I once believed I'd never see again.

I passed many unfamiliar faces, though none of them paid me much attention. Members of Amere moved back and forth, some carrying crates of ammunition or supplies, others armed and likely heading out to man a post.

I nearly smiled at the irony when they guided me through a door labeled *Principal*, and there, seated behind the desk, was the Ahri, flipping through a book whose title I didn't bother to remember.

"Good morning, Alez. Did you manage to get some rest? I told these two last night to leave a mattress in your room so you could sleep more comfortably. Did they?"

"They did."

"Good. If you'd said no, I was going to

make Laurent bite Rico in the balls as punishment."

He set the book down on the desk and stood. Moving to the window behind him, he pulled the curtains halfway shut.

"Alright, straight to it. I'm being called to... another base, Alez. Serbia's lovely, but they need me in France. I have to go, and I'm taking those three friends of yours with me."

He turned to face me. I mirrored the gesture, but to my surprise, neither Rico nor Laurent were anywhere in the room anymore.

"I want to take *you* with me too, Alez. Leaving you to rot here would be a waste —and I *hate* decisions that lead nowhere. Worse still, I loathe indecision even more."

There was something different in his eyes, in his tone. I think that was the

moment I finally understood who Viktor was—and who *the Ahri* truly was.

"I know you well enough. I've learned from you all I needed—and maybe a bit more. I have no doubts left. You're going to join us, Alez."

I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off.

His boots struck the wooden floor as he strode forward. I was taller, but in front of him, I felt like an insect staring up at a giant.

"No, that's not what I mean. You couldn't care less about Amere; you don't know or give a shit about our cause, and by now you don't even care whether we win or lose. You've got no one left to fight for. So, Alez, allow me—just this once—to make you a formal offer: come with me. Join Amere's ranks, but fight *for me*. Become part of my personal guard. Take orders from no one but me. I'm not asking you to

be another soldier—no, far from it. I want you at my back, ready to draw your weapon and pull the trigger the moment you hear my voice."

He extended a hand toward me, that same carefree smile on his face—the kind worn by a man whose hand is a poker of aces.

"You'll be one among thousands, and that's the treatment you'll get. All I ask in return is your skill and your loyalty. That hatred in your chest—that hatred for the world—let it shape a better future."

I thought of a thousand things I could say. I imagined hitting him, throwing him to the floor, strangling him with my bare hands. I pictured the aftermath—his blood and mine mixing beneath our feet. I thought about everything it had taken to get to this point. About every person I'd shot. About every fight I'd run from. I remembered each garbage heap I dug

through for scraps of food, every empty bottle I placed outside my shelters to catch rainwater.

And I came to the most selfish conclusion a man can reach: If the world's already lost, then there's no point in fighting for it—and there's no sin in making it worse if it means securing a warm bed and a full stomach.

I clasped his hand.

Out of the corner of my eye, for just a second, I saw Zara and David's faces fading into the darkness of the future that waited for me.

The Ahri nodded slowly, signing his name in the book of my life.

"Welcome to *Ameretat*, Alez."

. . .

May, 2031

"It's the last one!"

"Surround him! Don't let him leave the

restaurant!"

Angelique obeyed the order with lightning speed and vanished from sight. I swapped the magazine on my G36 and peeked over the hood of the car I was using for cover. Across the street, I saw the restaurant door slam shut behind the last of the six bandits, who was desperately trying to escape, throwing chairs and tables out of his way. I tried to line up my sights, but the tinted glass blurred the view. I could've fired anyway, but I didn't want to reveal my position without a clear shot.

Silence fell for a moment, then was broken by the noise of Angelique's Rattler, followed by two shotgun blasts. I felt reassured hearing Angel's weapon again seconds after.

Movement stirred inside the restaurant once more; I realized my partner had effectively cut off our target's escape through the back door. Probably unaware of where I was, the bandit stood still,

staring out the windows, maybe planning a new route. I knew I wouldn't get a better chance, so I raised my rifle and opened fire. Several holes appeared in the glass, and moments later I heard a muffled scream. For a second, I thought it was over —but then an explosion shattered the silence, and pellets rained down, hitting the vehicle. I threw myself to the pavement, seeking cover.

"Son of a bitch! Angelique! You hear me?!"

"Yes!"

"He's wounded but still shooting!"

I didn't want to give him time to think. Unsure of his exact position, I crawled around to the other side of the car and peeked out to keep firing. I saw Angelique hidden behind one of the restaurant's side walls, alert for any chance to enter and finish the target up close. She must have spotted something because she opened fire without hesitation and ducked back just

before the enemy shot again. Maybe he didn't expect her bullets to weaken the glass enough for his powerful close-range shotgun blast to punch a huge hole in the window—giving me a clear shot to finally end the intense firefight.

I squeezed the trigger and didn't stop until at least ten rounds had gone off. I heard no cry, but I saw the shotgun fall awkwardly to the floor. When I stood, Angelique emerged from cover and peeked inside the restaurant with her weapon's barrel first, delivering the coup de grâce before I could get there.

I heard her uneven breaths as I got by her side, watching the red mess the bandit had become. I placed a hand on her shoulder to calm her. She turned to me, lowering her rifle.

"That was the last one, right? Good job."

"Yeah, you too..."

She nodded weakly and took a deep breath, keeping her eyes fixed on me.

Returning her gaze, I noticed a small cut on her cheek, a thin trickle of blood running down to her chin.

"What's this?"

I said, wiping the blood away with my thumb.

"Oh, it happened back there. I had to drop to the ground for cover, and I think I got it when I fell. It's nothing, doesn't hurt."

"Doesn't hurt...?"

She shook her head, the ponytail tied at her nape swaying slightly.

"... but we'll disinfect it anyway, just to be safe."

She nodded and looked toward the unlucky bandit who had crossed paths with us while we scouted that part of the

city.

"I'll check his pockets and backpack. Alez, I think one of the other bandits had a 5.56—I'll go get it. We could—"

"No."

"Alez?"

"We're leaving. We're too far from home. It's been a long time since we ventured this far, and we don't know if others are nearby."

She thought about arguing for a moment but understood my point and followed without hesitation.

Back home, it was near midday. Our weapons and coats lay on the table, and we both wore lighter clothes. Kneeling on the floor, I rubbed alcohol over Angelique's wound as she sat on the sofa, closing her eyes tightly against the sting.

"Be more careful next time."

"Yeah..."

I put a small piece of medical tape over the cut and pressed it gently with my thumbs.

"Alez..."

"Yes?"

"Have you noticed...?"

"That the city isn't as quiet as it used to be?"

"Yes..."

"Yeah, the groups seem to come from the north. I don't know what happened up there, but the last four or five groups of bandits all came from the same direction. Maybe there was some displacement, or a commune fell and its members started roaming. I don't know, but we'll have to be more careful."

She touched the wound with her fingertips and asked timidly,

"Are we... going to have to move?"

"I hope not, but I won't rule it out."

"I see..."

I stood and stretched until my back cracked.

"I'll prepare lunch. You rest until it's ready. You did good today."

"Can I help?"

She said, watching me as I walked away. I stroked her head before leaving.

"If you want."

July 17, 2025, 8:57 p.m. 0 comments

FOLLOW STORY Report

/EN/DASHBOARD/CHAPTER/1762847/LIKE/#LIKED-BUTTON-1762847)

Read next chapter > Chapter Twenty-three: Angelique XI

ADVERTISEMENT

Leave a comment

EC

1000 characters left

Send

No comments yet. Be the first to say something!

~

Related stories

Gray Aria [Español]
(/en/story/185283/gray-aria-espanol/)

More stories

(/en/)

Pandora: New era

(/en/story/686518/pandora-new-era/)

THE LAST REALM: CHRONICLES OF NAN GUN ...

(/en/story/680599/the-last-realm-chronicles-of-nan-gun-book-one-the-unwilling-seed/)

© 2026 Inkspired®

User-submitted content subject to its own terms.

Proudly made in EC.

Stories that will **inspire** you.

(https://www.instagram.com/getinkspired) (https://www.x.com/getinkspired)

(https://www.facebook.com/getinkspired)
(https://www.youtube.com/@getinkspired)
(https://www.linkedin.com/company/inkspired)
(https://www.producthunt.com/posts/inkspired-2)
(https://discord.gg/ZAKyBsSfnR)

COMPANY

About us (/en/about-inkspired/)

Blog (/en/blog/)

Creators & Authors (/en/creators/)

Rewards Program (/en/rewards-program/)

Inko, Inka & Katze (/en/inko-inka-katze/)

PRODUCTS

Self-publishing services (/en/selfpublishing/)

Inkspired Store (/en/store/)

Mobile app (/en/mobile/)

Inkspired Writer app (/en/writer/)

Upgrade to Premium (/en/premium/?ref=footer)

Universes: Narrative Worldbuilding (/en/universes/?ref=footer)

Collectible Cards (/en/cards/?ref=footer)

Merch Shop (https://shop.getinkspired.com/?ref=website-footer)

COMMUNITY

Read stories (/en/discover/)

Events & Writing Contests (/en/events/)

BETA readers network (/en/beta-readers/)

Become an ambassador (/en/ambassadors/)

Writing tips (/en/blog/944/writers-blog/)

Community Groups (/en/communities/)

Latest Newsletter (/en/newsletter/)

SUPPORT

Community Guidelines (/en/community-guidelines/)

Verified Stories (/en/verifiedstories/)

FAQS (/en/faq/)

Advertisement and
Sponsored content (/en/sponsored-content/)

Contact us (/en/dashboard/getSupport/)

Privacy Policy (/en/privacy-policy/) Terms of use (/en/terms-of-use/)